A Capabilities Approach to Successful Societies

A Capabilities Approach to Successful Societies

Peter A. Hall

What creates a successful society? There is no simple answer to this question because decisions about the criteria by which success should be measured inevitably depend on normative judgments that are contestable and real-world conditions often entail concessions on some dimensions of success to secure improvements in others. For these reasons, even the most sophisticated efforts to address this problem, such as Amartya Sen's impressive theory of development as freedom, can be frustratingly indeterminate. As Michèle Lamont and I argue in *Successful Societies: How Institutions and Culture Affect Health* (Cambridge University Press 2009), however, this question is too important to ignore. Even when the answers are necessarily incomplete, social scientists should be asking such questions. Although there is a natural preference for more tractable subjects, the watchword of social science should not be 'convenience'. We need to advance our understanding not only of how societies work but of how they can work better.

The approach to this problem adopted by the *Successful Societies* volume is to take the health of the population as a relatively uncontroversial indicator of well-being, without suggesting it is the only important element of social success and then ask: how can our understandings of the conditions that advance population health be expanded? For our initial intuitions, we rely on an important literature in social epidemiology and then bring to the issues a wide range of observations about the social roles of institutions and cultural frameworks. Our objective is to show that population health offers fruitful terrain for the inquiries of social science.

The analysis generates a 'capabilities' approach to population health. One of the implications is that the success of a society depends on the distribution across the population of capabilities for coping with the life challenges that all people face, such as those associated with finding a partner, securing housing, raising children and the like. This concept of 'capabilities' is more limited than that of Sen but more concrete. Where there is better balance between those challenges and a person's capabilities, that person will experience less of the 'wear and tear of daily life' that is now widely believed to

have pervasive effects on health, through the experiences of stress, anxiety and frustration it engenders.

Social science can then ask: how do the structures of the economy, polity and society condition the distribution of capabilities across the population? We argue that they do so by giving rise to a specific distribution of *economic* and *social* resources, on which people draw for their capabilities. Thus, the organization of the national or regional political economy is associated with particular distributions of income and autonomy in the workplace. The structure of a society, associated with the shape of the social hierarchy and the factors that condition social connectedness, also distribute social prestige, recognition, and connections to social networks that are constitutive of capabilities. Here, we argue that cultural frameworks matter as much as social institutions. The collective imaginary of a society, composed of narratives that link its past to its future, accord recognition to particular groups that can affect the level of cooperation they receive from others and generate feelings of belonging that are also important to the capabilities and social resilience of individuals. This analysis provides terms in which societies can be compared that speak to the success of those societies.

In this analysis, there are also important implications for public policy-making. We live in a neo-liberal era in which governments are invariably attentive to the effects of their policies on the structure of the market economy. When policies are formulated, officials typically ask: what effects will this policy have on the structure of market incentives? But they are much less likely to ask: what effects will this policy have on the structure of society? As a result, policies with well-intended objectives often have perverse ancillary effects on the distribution of social resources. While stimulating economic development, they may erode the longstanding social networks intrinsic to the social connectedness of communities or shift the terms in which social belonging is defined. Therefore, we argue that governments should see public policy-making, not only as efforts to improve the allocation of economic resources, but also as a process of social-resource creation. If governments fail to do so, policies designed to allocate economic resources can inadvertently erode social resources.

The contributors to this symposium offer important suggestions about how inquiries of this sort into successful societies can be extended. In terms reminiscent of

E.P. Thompson's account of the 'moral economy', Natalie Davis reminds us that the collective imaginaries support particular kinds of collective mobilization, moral engagement and senses of worth that can be crucial to individual, as well as collective, well-being, for what they tell people about what they owe to and can expect from others. Her suggestions that the family is an important site for social success and that gender roles are intrinsic to social well-being point to important lines of inquiry. She is quite right that those inquiries should be attentive to the voices of the actors. The sinews of society are built on the mobilization of meaning.

The innovative analysis of Claus Offe is complementary in many ways and also appropriately political. He associates the success of a society with the ways in which it assigns responsibility, arguing that politics is at least partly about the management of responsibility and one metric of social success might turn on whether the assignment of responsibility in a society is ultimately fair. This is an especially important point in an era when market ideologies that assign the individual responsibility for much of what happens to him are now being called into question and, as Jane Jenson argues, when states are reconsidering how responsibility for such fundamental tasks as the rearing of children and the care of aging parents should be assigned among the public, private and community sectors.

Bo Rothstein notes that there is more to social success than life expectancy and urges scholars to be more attentive to indices of life satisfaction. We should care about whether life is 'nasty' and 'brutish' as well as whether it is 'short'. This is an important point. Scholars such as John Helliwell are doing interesting cross-national work on life satisfaction, which seems to be a more stable indicator than alternative measures of happiness. We are conscious, however, that responses to questions about life satisfaction are conditioned by the expectations of the respondents, which may vary cross-nationally in ways that must also be taken into account if such questions are to be good indicators of societal success. The quality of governance is also a crucial determinant of these outcomes. Efforts to measure the broader dimensions of social success reflect important steps beyond conventional measures couched largely in terms of national income.

The overarching point here, however, is that we need, not only better indicators of successful societies, but renewed ways of understanding how success is generated. For those of us interested in comparison, across Europe and beyond it, that entails finding new terms in which to compare societies. In recent years, social science has vastly improved its understanding of how to compare polities and economies. There is real value in extending such comparisons to the structures of society. At present, many scholars think of that primarily as a matter involving the distribution of income. We should be thinking more broadly, however, about the distribution of life chances and about the ways in which institutional and cultural frameworks structure the interactions that are not only central to social life but constitutive of the social resources that contribute to individual and collective well-being.